

N. B. Williamson

1894-1895

WHEN CHILDREN WRITE POETRY

CHARLOTTE MASON COLLEGE
HARLESDE

BY

W. MONK GIBBON

LONDON

PARENTS' NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL UNION
26 VICTORIA STREET, S.W.1.

Price Sixpence

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By MONK GIBBON.

'Well, we shall have such a prologue and it shall be written in eight and six.'—QUINCE.

Bottom, as you know, dissented, and wished it to be written in eight and eight, but I decided that for my purpose the carpenter gave the better counsel. For one thing eight and six is the metre of John Gilpin, and if we are going to count on our fingers, what could be better for the purpose than—

'So three doors off the chaise was stayed,
Where they did all get in.'

Anyone can count this, and having once got the knack of counting, the difficulty of 'Till, at his friend the calender's,' is practically negligible. Six and eight therefore it was, and in a short time all the fingers were counting and all the brows were knit.

I encourage children to write poetry, not because I hope one day to discover a Shelley — Shelley 'discovers' himself — but because I believe that no one fully appreciates an art who has not practised it himself. This is one motive, and the other — the other is that more romantic and perhaps less arguable belief that deep in every soul there is a poet, and that if I lay this trap for him he may for a moment reveal himself, if not in a verse, then in a line; if not in a line then in a single phrase.

But I do not say this to my eleven and twelve year olds. For them the immediate object is the achievement of eights and sixes, without undue distortion of emphasis, and with a fair

approach to sense. It is no use making the thing too difficult to begin with. Hence, I talk almost altogether of syllables and leave stress as a later development. Eight and six is so safe that it can almost be left to take care of itself, and take care of itself it does.

'His colour is a sandy brown,
He's of the greyhound breed;
And every night at six o'clock
He has his little feed.'

This is one of at least six poems all on the subject of dogs or puppies and all equally uninspired. Not that I say so to their authors. I think the infallible rule in anything where the creative impulse is concerned, is — first praise, then criticism. Convince every poet that he or she has done something successfully, if it be only in the choice of a title for their poem. The detestable pedagogue which lurks in all of us would doubtless like to expatiate on error, point out shortcomings and make comparisons; treating the whole affair as if it were an exercise in decimals. But the impulse is a mistaken one. Enter into no patient expositions, let your criticism be mere suggestion and given as aloofly as possible; for if you once begin to labour the point the thing ceases to be a creative activity and becomes a task. We do everything in fact to forget on these occasions that our relation is an academic one. I am never supposed to know the author of a particular poem — unless the writing is so bad as to be infallibly recognisable. Poems reach me signed Francois de Gambier, Anita Louise, Pierre Quiroule, Greta Garbo, and — may their shades pardon me — Michael Angelo, and Matthew Arnold. And when the whole group have been received and considered they are read out one day, roughly in inverse order of preference, so that the later your poem is in coming, the higher you deduce it stands in the estimation of the judge. But it is always emphasised that this is only an individual opinion and that it would be fairer to think of the poems as in three groups, the not very good, the good and (the phrase is relative) the very good.

Four line verses in eight and six are a somewhat pedestrian measure and not too much must be expected from them. The best poem on this occasion is an unfinished one, 'The Hunt.'

'The huntsmen wait in scarlet coats,
The horses paw the ground,
The horn is blown, the field moves off,
The master calls his hound.

'They canter up the clover field,
The chestnut clears the hedge,
They've found a wood, the hounds dash in,
The field waits at the edge.'

Here the pace of the line alters with its meaning — (nearly always an unconscious rather than a deliberate effect, even in real poetry; or rather the natural result of our language being largely onomatopoeic) — and there is no straining of sense or stress which is the fault of most beginners.

But quite apart from this particular poem, the general level of excellence is high enough to encourage the experiment, and we abandon essays for the six weeks that follow and take to verse-making instead. The second week I suggest that our metre should be as follows:—

U	—	U	—	U	—	U	—
U	—	U	—	U	—	U	— A
U	—	U	—	U	—	U	—
U	—	U	—	U	—	U	— A
U	—	U	—	U	—	U	— B
U	—	U	—	U	—	U	— B

'All eights; second and fourth lines rhyme and fifth and sixth; quite easy.' The diagram is only drawn because I do not want to be bothered with questions once composition has begun. It aids memory and for some reason gives confidence to the diffident, like having a chart to sail by. First, however, a poem in the metre chosen has been read aloud from Palgrave or from some modern anthology. It is a little difficult to get good model poems to the simpler metres. And not the least of the difficulties is that if the poem is good the writer's individuality will be so marked in the handling of that particular metre as to prejudice the issue. I am afraid to read more than a single verse of Longfellow's 'Slave's Dream' (and that one hastily), lest I should have a whole batch of imitations of it as the result. In fact the more 'anonymous' the model poem is the better, as it leaves each 'poet' free to decide the mood and music of his own work.

*Real
the poem
pattern*

The poems of the second week are better than those of the first. For instance the following:—

A BUTTERFLY'S DEATH.

'This afternoon I went and caught
A pretty little butterfly,
I put him in the killing-box
And left him there till he did die.
I wish I had not now for he
Is sweeter far when he is free.

'I took him out a day after
And stuck a shining pin through him,
I put him on the setting board
And took another shining pin
And opened out a coloured wing
And fixed it down with that bright thing.'

This poem also is unfinished, but I like its deliberation of those last two lines. It is the beginning of the successful handling of language.

Altogether different in subject (unless it be that both are broken on the wheel) is:

NOVEMBER 5TH.

'Guy Fawkes he whispered to his men,
"Shall we blow up this Parliament?"
The men, they answered "Yes, at once."
So all about their business went.
They hired a cellar far below
All traces of that London snow.

'But one man on the evil night
Had been awake to this vile plot.
So with some arms and men he went
And caught Guy Fawkes upon the spot
Guy Fawkes he tried to run away,
But, ay, it was his dying day.'

While the author of 'The Hunt' produces this:

THE RED DEER.

'With mighty antlers stretching high
The red deer glides through leafy glens,
He drinks from streams which ripple by
And runs about o'er moors and fens.
His baby bleateth loud with glee,
The deer are happy, they are free.

There is a noise, a thud, a cry,
His head is raised, his ears are pricked,
The frightened deer lets forth a cry
But he's too late, he has been tricked.
Hounds are on him, the does have fled,
The poor red deer is lying dead.'

There are in nearly every batch the usual number of poems about stars and birds, generally about birds that have come to an untimely end. Is it that every child has at some time or other found a dead robin in the garden and been struck by the poignancy of the event, or it is just a stock theme useful to a poet in search of inspiration? Similarly with stars. Does every child lie awake star-gazing and star-wondering until presently we get Browning at hundredth remove, but not necessarily any less genuine of impulse?

'How merrily you twinkle there,
You look as if you had no care,
But spend your time on sending light
On me at night.'

In quoting this I anticipate, for our metre for the third week is that of 'The Slave's Dream,' our old friend six and eight, but three rhymes to be thought of instead of two. It produces nothing very original and the following, from a poem named 'Rain,' can be taken as fairly typical. 3.

'I love to watch those snowy clouds
Go sailing through the sky,
For they are very far from me
And very very high,
And when they hit a mountain top
They all begin to cry.

'Then down upon the land below
The folk start up and say
It has begun to rain again
It rained yesterday.
Umbrellas then appear in sight
And children stop their play.'

True, one writer, who finds the discipline of rhyme and metre particularly trying, makes this promising beginning in his poem on 'Charwomen':

Charwomen are a burly race
Of nature's beauty sex,
Their frequent quarrels with their hubbies
They rule with their own lex.'

But the strain is too much for him and he ends chaotically:

'If in good employment
They will get 2 guineas a week
If they have some little bent
We cannot blame them we have
But things they do they have not meant.'

The third line I take as reference to a weakness shared with Mrs. Gamp, the fourth, unpunctuated, as an allusion to general human fallibility. But he has rhymed the wrong line to begin with and given us a verse of five lines instead of six. The poem really interests me more than 'Rain,' but the sculptor has obviously thrown away his chisel and used the sledge and it would be a mistake to praise it too much.

The fourth week brings better results. The verse is three lines of eight syllables followed by one of four. Both themes and treatment are far more various. The example read was lyrical and I am surprised when I get two ballads, one of ten, the other of eleven verses. I quote from the latter, a poem with a title by 'Burglar Bill':

'I froze until the footsteps died,
I raised myself, I heaved and sighed,
I ran towards a drainpipe near
And froze with fear.

'An upper window opened wide,
And from it a shrill voice outcried,
"Come here, my gun is here with me,
Stop! do not flee——".'

or this, the penultimate verse,

'And in the end I reached the ground
Bleeding all over, cut all round,
Landed in a cucumber frame,
Don't like that game.'

In very much the same vein is another boy's, 'Highwaymen,'

'A long long time ago they say
Men stopped rich folks on their way.
Highwaymen people call them then
Very bad men.'

whereas, the whole movement of 'A Child's Thought of Snow,' is different.

'You fall so softly gentle snow
But where you come from I don't know
My friend and I oft all the day
In you do play.

'Your mantle white spread all around
Covers this season's barren ground,
And on the leafless trees so tall
You also fall.

'I made snowballs of you to-day;
To-morrow come again, I pray,
That I may finish my snowman;
I hope you can.'

There are many adults who would find it hard to write as simply as this and with such sure effect. Its author, though she produces no poem of outstanding merit, is nearly always in 'the last three,' that is the batch of what we consider the most successful work in any one week.

In our fifth week we tackle the iambic pentameter. There is a chorus of dissent. This is going to be harder. But actually the results are better, or at least the poems seem to have a more individual utterance. Gray's *Elegy* is taken as example, followed quickly by some quatrains from Shakespeare's sonnets, lest Gray should influence our ear too much. Of the fifteen poems written nearly all scan correctly. Practice is telling. The game is easier than we thought. Take for example this from 'My Hut':

'The sun was shining then so bright and hot
And so I thought I'd walk up to the wood.
It stands alone upon a hill top high
And far and wide you see a view that's good.

'I gathered up some gorse and bracken fresh
And made a hut, and then a wooden seat;
I made a door with cardboard and with string,
And then I cut a window round and neat.'

I smiled when I read these lines, for there was something of the studied naïveté of 'Georgian Poetry' in them, though I am certain the writer has never read any of the anthologies in question. And since Georgian verse has been mentioned it may be worth while to pause and debate that rather difficult point,

as to how far one is justified in substituting the study of contemporary verse for that of the 'classics.' I believe it is a mistake ever to make the former the subject of examination, as at least one of the universities has done in its local examinations. For one thing contemporary verse, no matter how well chosen, has not undergone the same testing, and much that may appeal to a reader is nevertheless ephemeral. To use it, therefore, to form taste is a risky procedure. But even more important is what one might call the argument of historical precedence. This is summarised in the remark of a friend to me: 'If one does not read Dickens at twelve one will never read him.' (Add the corollary that if one does read him then our pleasure may last a lifetime.) Similarly with more than one of the poets, Scott precedes Browning not merely historically, but in the evolutionary sequence of mind. Miss the right moment for reading him and you have probably missed it for ever. Add one further argument which may seem partly contradictory to the last. Modern verse, in being nearer our own ideas, is more facile. The poetry of the past, if it gives more to us, also asks more from us, and it is a mistake to begin with the easier path. I encourage the reading of contemporary verse, but I believe that it is better that the child should discover the moderns for himself, and not as part of his school course, certainly not as part of an exam.

It is quite true that the children who write these poems for me are enjoying the benefit of 'a liberal education.' I would never call any of them either blue-stockings or high-brows — nothing further from the somewhat intense 'child-poet' type of individual can be imagined. But at the same time they have been brought up in an atmosphere in which poetry is one of the accepted — tacitly accepted — values. They do not have it hurled at their head; rather, if we are to have a metaphor, they have it poured about their feet. Many of them splash through the stream more or less unconsciously. For instance, take Sunday evenings. When we have sung our hymns we sit at tables, sewing, sticking stamps in albums, mounting butterflies, or even whittling a miniature warship out of a piece of wood. And while we do this, on alternate Sundays, literature and music are offered to us for our entertainment. We may even have to leave our

sewing or our butterfly collection and come up and read a poem aloud or contribute otherwise to the evening. No one is under any obligation to listen. All are under obligation to keep quiet enough to make it possible for others to listen. In this way even if in no other, the Muse would get her opportunity. Or take that injunction in our programme to 'read poetry daily.' I register a mental 'Oh Golly,' — or stronger, when I see it. Reflection convinces me that the easiest way to obey it is this: I say to the class, 'I'm putting Palgrave's Golden Treasury here. We will begin every English class with a poem read in turn by each one of you. That means you will only have to read about once in a fortnight. But have your poem ready when it is your turn.' The thing becomes a ritual. If I forget it they very soon remind me. It is interesting to see what the different readers choose. No comment is made at the finish. I say 'Very nice,' or 'Thank you So-and-so,' but the remark is almost a formula.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that in 'teaching' literature (not that I am fool enough for one moment to believe that one can 'teach it') spontaneity is the supreme virtue. That and sincerity. Not caprice. Not a different skimming of the cream dish every day. Not Russia to-day and Japan to-morrow and Arabia the day after. But a disciplined and at the same time genuinely held interest that never degenerates into hypocrisy of feigned interest. Why English is so badly taught (I take a well-known educational weekly's word for it that it is badly taught) is, because there are so few genuine enthusiasts, and so many painstaking, meticulous and conscientious blunders. If you want to kill a vital appreciation of books teach them conscientiously. Squeeze the orange until only the pips are left and insist that the class should dissect them. If ten children learn to 'elocute' a poem in each other's hearing the probability is, that nine of them will hate that poem ever afterwards. The birth pangs of elocution are too painful to be easily forgotten. Let them learn verse by all means, but out of each other's hearing and on different, preferably self-chosen material.

Or take this very question of verse-writing. It is obviously an 'occasional' activity. For nearly a year before this particular class of which I write, I have mulishly refused to ask

anyone to write a poem for me. The moment seemed inopportune. If I make it a regular activity I would soon be gnashing my teeth at the sight of a child poem. The regular and disciplined activities of my classes are reading and understanding and a certain amount of prose composition. I have compared the poems quoted here with the poems of other children written in the same school, but before I knew it. These earlier poems culled from old numbers of the school magazine, seemed to me much abler in every respect. But I preferred my own. For in the one case I was dealing with what seemed dangerously near an academic exercise, whereas in the other, though punctuation had to be assumed and stress was often wrong, there was something of the child's self in the poem, it was nearer a genuine utterance. Not that punctuation has not its importance, rightly insisted upon at the right moment, but insistence at the wrong moment may be to kill the creative impulse, and when all is said and done, poetry, thanks to its division into lines, needs stops less than prose which soon becomes gibberish without them.

I have digressed too far. To return to our iambics Here are two poems by boys of the same age, but whose characters are a complete contrast. If nothing else they prove that poetry is not confined to a particular temperament. Indeed they might almost be taken as an argument for Yeats' doctrine of the anti-self. The author of the first and more lyrical of the two is one of the rowdiest members of our community, boisterous, self-assertive, a keen rugger player, a person rather too fond of giving, but equally willing to take, hard knocks. The author of the second is highly strung, sensitive, essentially timid.

SAILING BOATS.

'The graceful sailing boats of long ago
Have far more charm than boats we see to-day
The clipper far more graceful racing home
Than tramps and liners steaming on their way.

'Although we ugly steamers have to-day
We still have yachts in memory of old
Still yachts with bending mast and belching sail
To face the sea and waters raging cold.'

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THE FIGHTING SPIRIT.

'I wish that in the old days long ago
That I was free, and Pirate yet was I
I'd roam about the seas, I'd to and fro
Chasing ships, and too true, never fly.

'I'd chase the Spaniard, I'd not let him free
I'd rob him of his cargo, if 'twas gold,
But yet he wouldn't get away from me
I would be experienced yes and bold.'

I give the poems in every case as I received them. I never suggest themes or treatment beyond pointing out that the more 'personal' a poem is to its writer the more interesting often it is to others. Nor do I suggest alterations after the poems have been given me. Often punctuation lapses completely and occasionally one detects what is more probably a misprint than an error in composition. But editing, if done at all, is better done by the child himself.

In the same batch is a poem by the girl who wrote 'The Hunt,' different from the general run and with quite a successful use of colloquial effect. It is called:

THE DEATH OF BILL.

"Where are yer goin' with all them sacks eh Bill?"
"I'm going ter take them down to't mill in't cart.
I guess I won't get back before the storm
There sure will be one. See the lightning dart?"

"You'd best be bucking up I guess, good-day."
"Good-day," says Bill, and rumbles down the hill.
He leaves the sacks and turns his horse, when, crash!
The mill is struck, it falls and buries Bill.

'The stones have broken Blossom's shafts, she's free,
And rushes homeward raising cries of fear.
Excited farmers follow and find Bill,
But they're too late, well may they weep a tear.'

It will be asked what about the failures. While the majority are flinging an enthusiastic leg across Pegasus, what about the hopelessly unpoetic? How do they fare? Well, we refuse to admit that there ever are any failures. Everyone gets a meed of praise if only for good intention. Only one boy is uniformly early in the list for writing doggerel. Comic verse has been banned from the start. If once permitted it would completely

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demoralise the proceedings. All humour must be unconscious. This boy feels his failure and one week I get this forlorn confession (unnecessary because he is one of those whose writings always identifies him).

'I know you'll agree
That all this mess is done by me
Because it is so badly done
I *can't* do none'

By a fool.

But the following week I receive at the same hands, but done in brushwork in Italian ink, so that it looks like some ancient document, perhaps a pirate's warning to his unfortunate victims, the following, signed Woolito:

FAREWELL.

'Farewell most wonderful and beauteous one
For I must flee before an enemy
Cause in my anger I have killed a man
Who is an awful enemy to me.

'His name is Duke of Olifantio
Servant to the King of Santiamell,
Again I bid you say farewell to me
For I shall never see you more—farewell.'

This was worth writing if only for the sake of meeting Olifantio and his sovereign Santiamell.

The great delight of the children is to guess the authors as the poems are read aloud. The latter do their best to escape detection, but it is difficult not to look embarrassed when your own poem is read aloud. One wretched youth is greeted with storms of execration for ending a little poem about a tree with the line,

'O! the diff'rence to me.'

He jumps to his feet and defends himself vigorously on the grounds that 'It fitted so well.' But plagiarism is regarded as unforgiveable and very often the charge is brought against quite innocent individuals. All scoffing against sentiment is discouraged. The same boy writing a poem about a sailor says:

'It seems so very funny this
That you may never kiss
Your mothers soft and glossy head
At time of bed—'

lines needing swift appreciation from the adjudicator lest a section of the audience should see an opportunity to scoff. Laughter on the whole though is quite friendly and is encouraged. We do not want the proceedings to become too formal.

Occasionally the poems have footnotes. The word 'Bower' has a footnote to the effect 'Pronounced Bour.' As it is rhyming with Tower, I wonder what would happen if I added a second footnote, 'Pronounced Tour'! Four verses in iambic pentameter on the subject of Twilight, reach me with this written below them: 'Footnote—To be read slowly and quietly'! I sympathise with this direction. I believe most poets in danger of being read aloud feel tempted to do something of the same kind.

The sixth week arrives, ardently looked forward to because in it the children are to be allowed to choose their own metres. The prospect of complete emancipation appeals to them, but in actual fact the results are very disappointing. There are several explanations for this. Firstly it is the end of term, following ten days of examinations and brains are faded and imagination slack. Secondly the freedom offered is really largely illusory, because none of them know enough about metre to experiment, and most of them are content to fall back on one they have used before.

A boy writes me a group of six poems which, if nothing else, shows energy, but most of his work is poor and towards the end has all the faults of a growing facility. Another boy writes 'The Chase,' which I will quote for a particular reason. It is a ballad and has certain of the virtues of the ballad which may not be immediately evident. For instance, the abrupt checks in the metre, even though they may offend a reader's ear at first, are really part and parcel of the scheme. That is to say, they have arisen naturally out of the demands of the narrative itself, and in making the latter vivid, the author has made his ballad abrupt. A line like 'And the wench thought herself quite neat,' is a fairly obvious concession to rhyme, but even in a lapse like that, the line itself was necessary, the maid's pleasure at having successfully disposed of the two guests (I take it in different rooms), being an essential explanation. The whole poem is vigorous and the comparison of pursued and pursuing

to hare and hound, though a little confusing, justifies itself by making the suggestion of chase so much the more vivid. To attempt to polish would probably be to spoil. This is a case where criticism is best silent. And in all the other poems quoted I have not supplied omissions of punctuation.

THE CHASE.

- 'Two dashing men rode o'er the moor
A cavalier in front, and yet
He stopped at the very first door
And he was by a young wench met.
- 'The heavy man who followed him
Had pistol in hand, and loaded too
He was quite young and tall and slim
He looked quite nice as on he flew.
- 'Into the house walked the chased one
After came the Roundhead in full chase
Cavalier thinking his day come
And full tired of this deadly race.
- 'The other dash'd round to the door
And inside the young two did eat
And the young one slept on the floor
And the wench thought herself quite neat.
- 'Then the Roundhead made a small hole
And push'd through the point of his sword
The young man as quiet as a mole
Pulled up a small part of the board.
- 'Into the darkness, down he went
The board was put back, the door gave way,
In rushed the hound, but nothing to see
But an old room, the boards in decay.
- 'There was a hole in the wood, and
A gun poked through, a gun spoke too
Down fell the hound, up came a hand
The hare then came up and search'd him through.
- 'The hound took his sword, struck at the hare,
Then grovelling they lay down to die
From them gushed blood each had their share
Now their bodies in the earth lie.'

Those who see only crudities of stress in this should read the ballad of 'Captain Carpenter' quoted in 'A Survey of Modernist Poetry,' by Laura Riding and Robert Graves. They will discover a quite astonishing similarity of approach and technique, accidental of course, for the author of 'The Chase' had not read 'Captain Carpenter,' nor is it a poem that one would read to children of that age. Both ballads demand that the reader should be able to pause at a particular place, and vary the pace of the lines, or even of different parts of a particular line. The eccentricities of stress are in fact part of the poem and arise naturally out of the theme dealt with.

Once again I emphasise that I am not evolving a forcing frame for poets, but trying merely to make the handling of language interesting and perhaps increase the appreciation of true poetry. If I wanted to make a poet I would certainly not set about doing it in a class. It is true that an older pupil commanded suddenly one day to 'write something' (in class) does write something and presently gives me this:

THE MOTH.

- 'A moth came in just now and flew
Dizzily climbing to the light,
Spurning unsympathetic night—
The silent stars, the chilling dew.
- 'How could it guess, as climbing still,
It gained the light that kills and maims,
Man-made it was, for man's own aims
To be extinguished at his will.
- 'Before it singed its straining wings,
I gave it gently from my hands
Back to the night, which understands
All tiny, piteous, craving things.
- 'So may I have the toiling pace
Which brings the goal so slowly near,
And climb with heart devoid of fear
Far above time and on through space.
- 'But ere I scorn those toiling feet
Which inch by painful inch aspire
May one set bound to my desire
And ward me from my own conceit.

Here we are nearer real poetry than in anything I have quoted yet. But author and I are under no illusions. We know that such poems 'come' (or do not come): they are not taught. Let us get away from the whole colossal humbug, the pathetic fallacy of modern education, which thinks that we can produce a mould which will make artists even of the rank and file. There is something terrible about this theorising, this generalisation, that standardisation, ending as it does in mere sterility: small inoculations of Masefield and de la Mare in the examination hall, rendering one immune to any danger of the divine afflatus. Sometimes, remembering Johnson's epitaph on Goldsmith, I feel inclined to say of the modern pedagogue, 'There is nothing he does not touch, and he touches nothing that he does not spoil.' One does not 'teach' any art, literature any more than another. Let the pedants specialise in knowledge, which is their own territory and one they have neglected of late, and leave Apollo to look after his own. The grinding of a wheezy barrel organ on his behalf is only an insult to the god. And presently the barrel organ, with its whole internal mechanism of question and answer, will fall to pieces and we shall perhaps have peace. For the very essential of all art is solitude, the mind capable of finding poise in itself. And it is just this that our busybodies, our attendants at conferences, our dialecticians at debates will not give us. They have got a bee in their bonnets and the bee is the notion that education can make us better than we are. It can, but so little better where the arts are concerned (and so devastatingly worse in the wrong hands), that it would be more to the purpose if they went back to the old-fashioned slogans of knowledge and character and left art to take care of itself. Now that every child must have a little poetry, a little painting, a little elocution, the chance of an enthusiast in any of these three directions is appreciably decreased. For your true artist loves nothing better than to talk with his fellow-artists, but the yapping of the herd about sacred matters is blasphemy to him. And for the most part the children in schools hear nothing but the yap. What chance have they?

And if all this seems to contradict my own practice in the matter I would say in self-defence that I yap as little as possible.

These children who write poems for me are young, they have still something of the universal artist in them. My aim is to keep it alive, not to kill it. I don't examine them on their reactions to a particular poem. If we paraphrase Shakespeare we do so quite frankly to prove that we understand what that particular passage meant, and that we can give our version logical and consistent statement. But it is knowledge, not art that concerns us on an occasion like that. Art is best left to take care of itself. I say to my older pupils, 'Cultivate your own company, don't be afraid to be alone; don't yap. You will never do anything great unless you can think a little deeper, work a little harder and aspire a little higher than the crowd. The crowd dreads solitude, it dreads silence. You must dread neither.' And coming into class one day I give them a hint of my educational heresies, passing across the table to them some verses scribbled on a stray slip of paper.

MAGPIES AND PIGEONS.

'Leave chattering to that vain bird
Whose sleek and glossy plumage twain
Shows all the indecision in
An empty and an idle brain;
Pert judicators of our luck,
Though two be found the tale to tell,
Talk is no harbinger of truth,
And even three may folly spell.

'And brood, my children, brood like those
Who all one sultry summer day,
Hid in a little copse of larch
Croon in a wise and silent way;
And when the chatteringers have gone
And greener shadows further fall,
Shoot like an arrow from their bough
Swifter and speedier than all.'

Once in my own schooldays I remember discovering in the school library a volume entitled 'A Poetical Compendium and Rhymer's Dictionary.' This honest treatise started with the encouraging information that not four people in I forget how many

million were likely to write a poem which would survive their century. The odds in this particular race of genius were apparently so long that the wisest course appeared to be warned off the turf at the very outset. Sorrowfully I closed the book, for I refused in these circumstances to be appeased with the sop that followed, namely, the statement that versification was 'a harmless amusement which could bring a great deal of pleasure to the many who might indulge it.' Not for me the fifty different rhymes to the word 'go' if none of them were likely to lead me to the slopes of Parnassus!

A good many people take very much the same attitude in regard to the encouragement of poetics at school. No child of that age, they say, is in the least likely to write a poem of any merit, or indeed to write a poem at all; why, then, flatter their egoism, enlarge their perhaps already swollen little heads, with the suggestion that the divine afflatus is for them? I remember the poet A.E. himself speaking to me a little contemptuously of the activities of the Perse school as a manifestation of precocity quite misleading in its success. Read poetry by all means, read the best poetry and steep the soul in it, but do not offend the Muses—rather touchy ladies at any time—by permitting 'tig' amongst their groves.

The attitude is plausible; it was certainly my own in regard to the rhyming dictionary—all or nothing, and in this case nothing, since all is for the so very few. No one encouraged me to write poetry at school. Once I was permitted to translate an ode of Horace into English verse. My effort, adjudged by myself to be the ablest of the whole form, was held quite negligible by my form-master, and from then on I abandoned translation, leaving it to the lesser men and preferring the greater risks and greater rewards of original composition. But my excursions were entirely private and received no recognition from official authority such as I have set out to justify here.

For I have set out to justify, determined, in view of the results, to be as boastful of my inconsistency as Whitman was. I do not suggest that there should be a poetry class twice weekly in every elementary school in the kingdom, and examinations for incipient Shakespeares and scholarships to speed them on

their way. I do not even suggest that poetry should be encouraged in all schools, or indeed in any school but the particular one I have in mind. Of all modern curses under which we suffer—and there are, in all conscience, enough of them—the zeal for standardization is perhaps the worst, and the zealots who try to see to it that we all read the same book, hang the same picture, admire the same view and use the same tooth-paste are the most misguided. If I thought that I was in any danger of starting a 'poetry movement' in the schools, I should lay down my pen here, afraid of the time when I might have to face Styx and the angry shades of the poets on the opposite shore.

No; let us see the thing in proportion, leaving poetry movements, even adult poetry movements, to their own. Broadly speaking, the case for writing poetry is that if you write poetry yourself you are more likely to enjoy it when you read it by other people. Narrowly speaking, the case is that even at school the talent for self-expression may be cultivated provided the thing is viewed primarily as an artistic and spontaneous activity and not as a pedagogic exercise. Pope has found his way into many anthologies with a poem written at the age of fourteen. A child of that age *can* write genuine poetry, though it is unlikely that he will. Literature, differing from music and, in lesser degree, drawing, does not favour precocity. Our libraries would be very little the poorer if they had nothing in them written by an author under the age of eighteen, or even twenty. We should lose Chatterton, but not much else beside. The chance therefore of a schoolboy or schoolgirl producing great poetry is so small as to be almost negligible, and it is better to concentrate on the other, the broader aspect, the arousing of interest through the exercise of the creative faculty.

This is how the adventure fared in our own particular case. We are a community of, roughly speaking, eighty. Jack and Jill go up the hill together as far as fourteen. Then Jack goes off to his public school and Jill continues alone. It is, to the writer at any rate, the natural arrangement. The segregation of a boy eight or nine years old from his own or anyone else's sisters seems to him far more unnatural than the arguments urged against co-education by the more zealous of its enemies.

Has he no sisters? Then here is his opportunity to acquire some. Has his cousin Arabella no brothers? Here also is her chance.

However this is not the case for co-education, but merely the necessary explanation of the dual authorship of the poems. If Jill's poems are better than Jack's, it must be remembered that she has, in a number of cases, four years' seniority to him and that his poetic career—as far as we are concerned—is cut short at a time when she is just beginning to do her best work. At the age of ten there is not much between them; if anything, he has the better of it there.

And first a word of acknowledgment to Mr. Caldwell Cook and the Perse School. It was a Perse Playbook which first started us on the upward, or, as you choose to regard it, the downward track. Casually encountered in a staff-room book-case, it suggested possibilities, and extracts from it were used on more than one occasion to fire the spirit of emulation and rivalry. Mr. Cook, we think, over-emphasises the ballad, and his class chantings are something we have never attempted; but at the same time he is the original prophet of school verse and to him we owe recognition of the fact that the four-line poem is something within the reach of the youngest. It was by reading aloud what the Fens had done that we first stimulated the Dorset downs to follow suit. Ungracious and even dishonest, therefore, if we did not acknowledge it here.

Once the infection was sown the epidemic spread. Poetry had 'taken' in the same way that ping-pong was to take a term later. Whole classes seceded, with a little encouragement, to the camp of the minstrels. Elsewhere we have referred to it as a mild form of conscription which devoted a period normally allotted to essay writing to the composition of verse, but we add now that the volunteers were quite as numerous as the conscripts, and that people retired to their dormitories at night full of ideas for their next poetic flight of fancy which was to be completed before morning. Even 'the Hut,' abode of so-called innocence and indubitable illiteracy, took to versification and dictated their efforts to anyone good-natured enough to provide the necessary pencil and paper.

In this way there reached us, on a small sheet of bright pink

paper of the sort customarily used for birthday invitations,

THE COW.

I saw a cow, a rad, rad cow,
And he is very fierce
And he is dashing up and down:
Soon me his horns will pierce.

A., aged eight, anything but a blue-stocking, was the author of this ballad of the Rad Cow. A year later she was to be the best narrator in her class, but this was the first sign she had ever given of latent talent. The strange thing about poetry is that it springs in the most unexpected quarters. Every school has at least one child in its confines whom it is willing to back against the whole rest of Europe for sheer slowness of wit. Such a one is B., whose fourteen years have not succeeded in getting her further than Form IIA, who writes beautifully, spells excellently, but for sheer muddleness of head and confusion of idea holds our record. Beady-eyed, spectacled and black-haired, she pursues her amiable if slightly inquisitive course through the Junior School, and the last thing you would suspect her of being is the potential poet. But here is B.'s poem:

IN THE HAY FIELD.

As someone was walking one morn in May,
I saw some men in a field of hay;
And as he walked along the road
Something jumped out and was a toad.

Another time he came that way,
But the men were not in the field of hay;
The gardener went to find them, for they were trespassers,
And he went through the wood and found them hiding in the firs.

I saw on the very next day
The man on the horse in the field of hay;
And he was dressed in green attire,
And I called to him, 'Sir, Sir, Sir.'

He took no notice, but went galloping on,
For he seemed in a hurry to get home.
On the sea the boats were tossing on the foam.

Why do I commend this? Largely for that line, 'Something jumped out and was a toad.' But also because, in spite of being disconnected, wrongly scanned and, one might say, living from hand to mouth, there is still something vivid and spontaneous about it, making it B.'s own and not B.'s conception of what she thought was demanded from her.

For the same reason I like C.'s ballad of Perseus and Andromeda. It scans even more irregularly, it has some respect for mythology but none for biology (or whatever science concerns itself with dragons), and it throws in a whole extra half line on one occasion in the most barefaced fashion.

PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA.

While Andromeda lay on the rock,
And while above the gods did mock,
Waiting for that dreadful crock
To eat her tender body.

Then brave Perseus from above
Came swooping down just like a dove
And landed down on the rock just by Andromeda,
whom the gods did mock,
And turned that dreadful crock to rock.

Then Perseus, holding her with one arm,
Listened to the crowd's cheers loud and long;
Then Perseus asked the hand
Of the fairest maiden in the land.

Then Phineus the betrothed one
Attempted to kill Perseus and win the fair one;
But Perseus, seeing what he wanted to do,
Got out his sword and slew him too.

One evening in the week the whole school gathers in the dining-hall to do handicrafts and to listen either to music or to readings from literature. This is a good opportunity to read aloud a few of our own neophyte attempts. I have been accused of praising too easily, but the truth is that at the outset praise, and generous praise, is essential. Otherwise ardour would be damped off before it had done anything. If a poem is definitely and irredeemably poor I do not read it aloud, but I mention its

title in passing in company with a number of other poems. But if it has even one redeeming line, I read that line out, praise it, and then go on to discuss the weaknesses of the poem. Praise which follows blame generally has the flavour of patronage, but blame which follows praise is acceptable even to sensitive ears.

The poems that go down best, of course, are those with a humorous twist to them. There are two small friends in the school, and their friendship is celebrated here by a third and mutual friend, D.:

PILL AND JILL.

There was a little girl called Jill
Who had a little friend called Pill;
And as it was a rainy day
They had to stay indoors and play.

They got out all their toys and things,
And played at lovely Queens and Kings;
But in came nurse to say that Pill
Must go and have her daily swill.

But Pill did certainly not want to go.
'Will you come?' said nurse. Pill said 'No.'
'Then I must certainly drag you, Pill.'
'No, I will have none of your skill.'

This is by E., a serious-minded young person who one day is going to be a missionary in India:

WAKING UP.

As I woke up one morning
There wasn't any din;
I heard the church bells ringing
And said, 'Oh blow my sin.'

As I woke up one morning
The sun was shining bright,
In trees the birds were singing
And everything seemed right.

When I read this first I took the explosion at the end of the first verse to mean a healthy contempt for past error and a rather commendable method of dealing with it. Reading it again, I wonder whether I was wrong, and whether it is not

meant as an expression of penitence appropriate to the particular day? I prefer the former theory, and in view of the second verse I stick to it for the present. Sin told to go about its business without further ado and further discussion is about the best thing a child of E.'s stamp can do.

Here is an attempt in free verse by F. :

WHAT SHALL I BE?

O what shall I be when I'm a grown-up man?
Perhaps I'll be a sailorman,
And sail across to France, China or Japan;
And when I come back, mother, I'll give you a lovely blue and
yellow caravan.

Or shall I be a policeman?
And teach the motorists all they have to learn:
That they mustn't go too slow and they must not go too fast,
And I'd also help the children past.

But as I'm still only a small boy,
I'll go and buy another toy;
And then I'll pretend that my chair is a great big ship, and I'm
going to explore exciting foreign lands,
Where perhaps I'll try and climb those mountains you call the
Andes.

Then I'll pretend I'm a policeman.
Oh! there's nurse, who says it's time for bed,
And mother hugs me tight
And says 'Good-night, my little man.'

The last line was probably intended to be split, but this is how
I received it. In more regular metre F. produces the following:

IF.

Old Mr. Owl lived in a tree,
His thoughts were on mice,
But mice roamed too free.
He fluffed out his feathers
And rolled one large eye,
And thought 'I could catch them—
If only they'd fly!'

Of the boys, G. is probably the best. He is ten. This is what
he does when he turns to verse:

A LITTLE BIRD.

A little bird in a tree
Sang a pretty song to me;
Up upon a branch it hopped
But suddenly saw me and stopped;
And then it twittering flew away
To come again another day.

(A touch of James Stephens there, not that I imagine G. has
ever heard of him.) Then:

BROWN MONKEYS.

There is a nice temple
Far, far away,
Where little brown monkeys
Love for to play.
Oh! you should see them play,
Always playing every day;
Up and down and round they swing,
From tree to tree themselves they fling,
Always landing on a branch,
But this is cleverness, not chance;
Chase each other up a hill,
Chatter on a window-sill.
Thus they play, round and round,
Making every sort of sound,
Thus they play, all the day.

I have not touched on the more serious efforts yet. The
younger the writer the more unexpected the poem. After four-
teen one may foretell with greater accuracy what will be forth-
coming. This is from a girl of fifteen (H.):

BLINDNESS.

Oh, it is spring on Dorset Downs,
Young April dances there,
Waking the sleepy primrose buds,
With cowslips in his hair.
And richer the gorse than Spanish gold,
Where breezes, honey-sweet,
Sing through the thyme and buttercups
That kiss his naked feet.
Can one see dancing the scarlet sails
Out on the silver-blue?
There must be blossoms in orchards now,
Blush-rose and pearl'd with dew.

I almost see the great sweep of down
Where velvet hill meets sky;
And the scented pines breathe memories
Into my window high.

Out in the sunshine red hawthorn flames,
And April's silver rain
Spangles the flowers and ferns that I
Can never see again.

Several of the boys attempt ballads, none very successfully. The longer poem will always, or nearly always, be less successful than the shorter one. Sustained flight is possible only to a few. One urges the writer to polish his work, but not to the point of becoming a burden. We are out to encourage self-expression rather than self-consciousness. Get the children interested first, and then if the taste genuinely exists the passion for perfection of form will come in time. Here are two poems in both of which there is a clear sense of form. The first is by I. (thirteen this time):

CHLOE'S SLUMBER.

Firstly comes the golden bed,
A fitting couch for Chloe's head,
And then is seen the mattress neat
That's covered by a snowy sheet.

There is a second sheet perforce
Which, it is said, is far from coarse;
For silk and cotton here do meet
To cover Chloe's dainty feet.

The pillow is of softest down
To calm away each fretful frown;
The pillow-case of finest lace
Is cradle meet for Chloe's face.

When morning's rays begin to peep
Into the room where she's asleep,
No wonder that she wakes so bright
For Chloe's had a dreamless night.

This technically is excellent. It is not a style which appeals to me personally, being too artificial. When I read it aloud I believe I spoil it by this fundamental lack of sympathy. But I am as ready as anyone to praise its particular merit. Form here is on at least equal terms with matter. It shows strong influence

of the Jacobean, and this puzzles me, for I. denies any special knowledge of them, until I remember that a year before, at the annual audition of the Poetry Society, I have heard her recite Marvell's 'The Girl describes her Fawn.' (I do not draw her attention to this, for I believe at this stage it is a mistake to point out influences. Once again one needs to beware of making the poet too self-conscious.) Asked how the subject suggested itself to her, she says, 'I just thought of it when I was making my own bed.'

The last poem shows perhaps as distinct an influence of Keats as I.'s does of Marvell. It would be unfair to say that it contains more of its writer, for I.'s poem has in it just as much of I. as this has of J., only the content is different. J. is an all-rounder in spite of a very serious illness in childhood. She is interested in science, in art, in literature, in language, and her poem is

ON MUSIC.

Oft have I listened, wondering silently,
At lovely music being softly played,
And it has called up visions beautiful—
Visions, alas, that always quickly fade,
Glimpses of towns and half-remembered places,
People with sad but very lovely faces.

Oh, could I see it as it really is,
That picture that must surely be behind,
Could I but see it for a moment small
And fix it then forever in my mind!
A flimsy shadow it must always be—
The substance of it I shall never see.

Some verses by K.:

THE SHEEP.

In a wide white pen are the woolly sheep,
I see them when I go to sleep—
They look so big and woolly then.
Upon the plains they play all day,
I see them as they pass that way
And up the leafy lanes.
Then twilight falls and back they flock
To the pen to stay till crow of cock
And the world is full of calls.

(June, 1928; 9½.)

THE FROG PRINCE.

The Princess slowly raised her head
 And she saw the ball in its watery bed;
 And then she saw an ugly eye
 Peeping up from the pool nearby.
 'Ah, woe is me,' she cried in fright,
 'What is that thing so hard and bright?'
 Then a frog leapt out from the water still
 And begged her to listen and fear no ill;
 But she only began to cry again
 And her tears were like a Summer's rain.
 The frog just waited in sad despair,
 Then he hopped upon her golden hair:
 'O tell me the cause of this Summer shower
 Down in this sun-flecked forest bower.'
 'My ball, my lovely golden ball,
 I dropped it into the waterfall.'
 The frog dived down in the water cool,
 Into the heart of the forest pool;
 He rose to the top, and she gave a cry,
 She caught it and tossed it into the sky:
 'I thank you, I thank you, for bringing it back,
 In plenty, in riches, you nothing shall lack.'
 Then she sped away like a lightning streak
 With her golden ball ere the frog could speak.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

There was a baby soft and sweet,
 His mother loved him, oh so sweet.
 What do you think his name was called?
 Jesus, Lord Jesus.

The golden glory of the roofs which glisten in the sun,
 The golden roofs of old Peking are loved by everyone,
 And through the weeping willow trees a glimpse of gold is caught.
 The golden glory of the roofs in days gone by was wrought,
 And sometimes on a Summer's day the golden roofs will shine
 Beneath the sunshine's noontide ray in one long golden line.

WHEN THE BATS FLY.

Shine and shimmer, shimmer and shine,
 The golden roofs, in a golden line,
 Capture the twinkle of sunbeams fair
 And fling it back to the golden air.
 Glimmering gold, brightest of blue,
 Blending together, a beautiful hue!
 Out from the eaves, a rustle and quiver,
 The air is filled with a movement and shiver;
 Out in the evening the black bats fly—
 Out from the eaves of the old Nan Hai.

(Written for an artist, 'because he sent me a picture which he painted
 of a corner in the Nan Hai.')